

## **An evening with Dan Rebellato, dramatist and lead writer on BBC Radio 4 drama 'Blood, Sex and Money'**

On Friday 11 February 2022, members of the Society enjoyed a face-to-face discussion with guest speaker Dan Rebellato, a renowned playwright, and Professor of Contemporary Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London. Dan was part of the creative team behind the BBC Radio 4 series 'Blood, Sex and Money' a large-scale adaptation of Zola's twenty-volume '*Rougon Macquart*' novel sequence, told over twenty-seven episodes. The series was a huge critical success for the BBC and gathered awards and great press reviews – the *Daily Telegraph* called it 'unmissable.'

Dan himself was the lead writer on the serial and wrote seven of the episodes and throughout the course of the evening, members were invited to listen to a number of dramatic scenes from episodes inspired by, amongst others, *La Fortune des Rougon*, *L'Argent*, *La Curée* and *Le Rêve*. Compelling dialogue and evocative music brought to life some of Zola's most memorable characters such as the mysterious Abbé Faujas, the tragic Renée Saccard (played beautifully by Anna Maxwell Martin) and the idealistic young lovers Silvère and Miette (played by upcoming talents Ashley Margolis and Shannon Flynn) in a production which took over eighteen months to complete.

It was clear from the outset that Dan had a real passion for Zola's characters and plotlines.

'Many of the themes that Zola tackles are still so pertinent today,' he said, enthusing about Zola's curiosity about the human condition and his portrayal of greed and corruption in public life, mirrored by brutal moral decay in private life.

'But among the lesser-known books there are some remarkable discoveries to be made,' he revealed when asked about the research process. 'I'm really pleased to have had a chance to work on some of my favourite lesser-known books, like *Le Rêve* and *L'Argent*.'

The star of the 'Blood, Sex and Money' adaptation is undoubtedly British veteran actress Glenda Jackson who plays the role of 104-year-old Aunt Dide – aka Adélaïde Fouque – the formidable matriarch of the Rougon-Macquart family. Dan described Glenda Jackson, who was acting again for the first time after a gap of twenty-three years, as 'splendidly terrifying'.

'It was one of the most overwhelming experiences of my life sitting in a room watching Glenda Jackson speaking my lines. She carries in her voice undeniably commanding authority, moral integrity, and a wealth of wisdom and experience,' said Dan, explaining that Zola's use of the omniscient narrator was not a technique that would work well for a radio drama. 'It took a lot of discussion and experimenting but ultimately we agreed Aunt Dide would be the ideal person to tell the story of the family,' he said.

When tackling the issue of adaptation, Dan conceded that it was impossible to be one hundred per cent faithful to a text. 'When you make an adaptation, you are essentially writing for two different audiences, those who know the book and have certain expectations, and those who haven't read the book and are coming to the novel for the first time,' he explained. 'But it can never be 100 per cent faithful, and our series did face some criticism, with some listeners for example saying we had 'dumbed down' Zola works.'

During the discussion, it was generally agreed that many of Zola's works remain largely unknown to readers in the UK, and that his novels are still considered rather old-fashioned. 'This is a pity,' Dan said, agreeing that fundamentally Zola's novels are about people – families, neighbours, lovers, and friends – and timeless themes such as love, addiction, debt

and envy - which make the novels accessible to all, and provide rich material for dramatic adaptation. 'We were very fortunate that the BBC got on board with our series – the title 'Blood, Sex and Money' certainly helped when we were pitching the idea!' he said. 'It was,' he added, 'very reassuring to hear that the great Zola scholar and biographer, the late Henri Mitterand, endorsed the title, telling our producer "Of course! That's exactly what the books are about!"'

On behalf of the Emile Zola Society, we would like to thank Dan for taking the time to come and speak to us. It was indeed interesting to hear from a creative-industry professional and gain an insight into how Zola's classic novels and characters were made vividly available to a mainstream audience.

Whilst the complete series is not available on BBC Sounds or iPlayer, it can be purchased via 'Audible' and is recommended listening!